

Integrating Social Media into Your Teaching

Dr. Ayman El Tarabish, Executive Director
International Council for Small Business
Sept. 13, 2009



Most students and educators are now aware of what social media are and how their use impacts our communication. Social media tools include online blogs (short for “web logs”), “Wikis,” web sites that are open to contributions by anyone (the best known probably being Wikipedia), and Twitter, the name of both a method for sending short text messages to a broad audience and the organization that supports this tool. Formal internet sites that support social media contacts include My Space and Facebook, which offer users personal home pages on which they can share information about themselves with

selected others. The use of social media in education is a new phenomenon that has many educators trying to find ways to integrate that use into their teaching practices.

In this article (***Learning to Blog***), I will share information about how educators can integrate online blogs into courses such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and small business management. I will explain how to find free online blogging service websites, how to write a short blog and require students to comment on it, and how to set up a grading structure for blogs. I will include examples of instructor blogs and student replies and will discuss how to incorporate student replies into class discussions.

What is a blog in general terms?

A blog (a contraction of the term “web log”) is a type of online website, usually created and maintained by an individual. This person adds content through regular entries which may include personal comments, descriptions of events, and other material such as graphics, audio and video.

Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject. Others function as more personal online journals. Although most blogs are primarily textual many combine text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and media related to a specific topic. The ability of readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs..

To learn more about blogs, please visit the following sites:

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>
- http://www.blogger.com/tour_start.g
- http://codex.wordpress.org/Introduction_to_Blogging

Guide for instructors: How do I define a blog for my course syllabus?

I have prepared a standard introduction that can be copied and, with minor modifications, inserted into your course syllabus:

A blog (short for web log) is a personal online journal (a log) that is frequently updated and

intended for general public consumption by being posted on the internet (web). For this class, all blogs will be private for the students registered. That is, only the instructor will have direct access to a student's blog. Blogs are defined by their format: a series of entries posted to a single page in reverse-chronological order (the most recent entry first). Blogs generally represent the personal views of the author. Some also reflect the purpose of the web site that hosts the blog. The topic of these blogs will center on **(enter title of the class or subject matter)**. They may include brief philosophical musings, commentary on internet articles about **(enter subject matter)**, and links to other web sites that you found interesting, especially those that support a point that you are making. The blog should be posted no later than **(enter the due date)** of that week it is due.

Guide for instructors: Can you help me find a free blogging web sites?

There are many excellent and reliable free web log sites available. I recommend two sites that I have used for the past three years, which I think are extremely reliable. This does not mean that I endorse only these two sites; I mention these because of my personal experience and knowledge in using them.

Site #1: www.wordpress.com

Features that I liked:

- It is free
- Available in 50 languages
- The blog may be either public or private
- Excellent design templates are provided to help focus the theme of the blog
- A helpful record of blog usage is maintained; this can help to evaluate student involvement
- Graphics, audio, and video are easy to add
- You can have your own domain name (e.g., Your Name.wordpress.com)



Site #2: www.Edublogs.com

This site offers many of the features as www.wordpress.com but Edublogs.com was developed specifically with teachers and students in mind. While one can sign-up for a free version there is also a for-fee version that includes more advanced features. Take a look at <http://edublogs.org/campus/> if you are interested in a larger scale version for your academic institution.

A third option: Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Many and perhaps most educational institutions are now using one or another form of an online learning system. These are commonly called "learning management systems," abbreviated as LMS. Such systems are, of course, fee-based and, since they are typically provided to an institution, availability will depend on your school's contract. A very popular LMS used by many

educational institutions in the United States is [Blackboard](#). Blackboard offers a module within the system that allows instructors to quickly create educational blogs. Part of the benefit of using an LMS like Blackboard is you can easily tag each blog as an assignment and enter a grade for each student. At the end of the term the LMS system will sum up all the blog grades. This is different than using the two sites I mentioned before because if you use these (or similar) sites you will have to keep track of your student's blog grades and then calculate a total and enter a final blog grade into your grading system.



If your institution does not subscribe to an LMS, there is a free LMS called Moodle that you might want to look up yourself at <http://moodle.org/>

Guide for instructors: How can I integrate blogs into class sessions? How many blogs should I have? What is the grading structure for blogs?

If you have decided to set up a blog and integrate it into your class, then the next important questions concern the number of blogs and how to grade them.

Let me preface this discussion by saying that through experience I've found that the more the students are engaged in the classroom through discussion, the more the class seems to be going well. I'm always thrilled to walk out of a class in which my students were actively engaged in classroom conversations. I consider blogs to be in many respects the equivalent of class discussions. If I can get the same high level of dialogue in the classroom through the online blogs; than I have captured both the students who are extroverts and those who are more introverted.

Integrating blogs into the classroom

It is the responsibility of the instructor to link blog comments to class content and discussion.

To do this you will obviously have to read each of the blogs. Since they will generally be fairly short, this should not be a problem. If students ask how long a blog entry should be the general answer is, "As long as you need to express your view or make your point." I find that good blogs are usually 350 to 400 words. Entries under 200 words are typically too brief to go into enough detail and those over 500 are simply far too wordy.

To connect blogs to the classroom, pick the ones that catch your attention and highlight their specific points at your next class meeting. Ask class members to comment; you might simply ask who agrees and who disagrees or has a different view. If a student's comments seem personal, you don't have to identify the writer. If necessary, you can reword the comment so that the writer remains anonymous. Of course, if the comment simply makes an excellent conceptual point, you might want to identify the writer and even reward him or her, with praise or a small gift (a mug or t-shirt, for example). This will encourage others to write better so you can recognize them, too. I have found that recognizing students in my undergraduate classes for their blog ideas and using their points as a basis for classroom discussion is a strong incentive for writing effective blogs.

Number of blogs

I have two suggestions concerning the number of blogs you should have. This is based on the length of your term. If your class lasts for a semester (i.e., September to December), then I recommend you set up between eight and ten blogs. If you have a class that is quarter based (seven weeks), then I recommend five or six blogs. Because I teach on a semester basis I require each student to make ten blog entries.

Grading blogs

The following grading structure is based on a semester-long class. I've set this up so you can simply copy it into your syllabus if you like.

Blog requirements: Each student will post a blog covering the topic(s) discussed in the classroom. A total of ten (10) blogs are required. A schedule of specific due dates for posting will be provided. In your blog you should:

- reflect on the reading assignments and classroom discussions;
- investigate topics online and then report on their research;
- write about shared classroom experiences;
- copy and paste thought-provoking quotes from other blogs, then offer your own thoughts on the topic; and,

- ask your classmates to review your blog and give you feedback.

Grading blogs: A total of three (3) points can be earned for each blog. Points are assigned based on the following four criteria:

- Relevance to the topics discussed in class (1 point)
- Quality of content posted (1 point)
- Thought provoking ideas (1/2 point)
- User feedback (1/2 point)

As there are a total of 100 grading points possible and the total number of blog points possible is 30, your blog will count for a total of 30% of your course grade (10 blogs at 3 points each equals 30 points total).

The following grading structure is for a seven week class. Again, you may simply copy this into a syllabus if you wish:

Blog requirements: Each student will post a blog covering the topic(s) discussed in the classroom. A total of six (6) blogs are required. A schedule of specific due dates for posting will be provided. In your blog you should:

- reflect on the reading assignments and classroom discussions;
- investigate topics online and then report on their research;
- write about shared classroom experiences;
- copy and paste thought-provoking quotes from other blogs, then offer your own thoughts on the topic; and,
- ask your classmates to review your blog and give you feedback.

Grading blogs: A total of five (5) points can be earned for each blog. Points are assigned based on the following four criteria:

- Relevance to the topics discussed in class (2 point)
- Quality of content posted (2 point)
- Thought provoking ideas (1/2 point)
- User Feedback (1/2 point)

As there are a total of 100 grading points possible and the total number of blog points possible is 30, your blog will count for a total of 30% of your course grade (6 blogs at 5 points each equals 30 points total).

Tips on grading blogs:

- Give a score of 0 points to those who do not post a reply to your blog by the deadline.
- Give only partial credit to those whose blogs simply agree with text or classroom comments and do not offer any new ideas.
- Remind your students to watch for punctuation and grammar. Take off points for extremely poor style.

Sample Instructor Blog and a Student Comment.

The following blog is used in the first week of a small business management class. The objective of this blog is to get students to start discussing the difference between an entrepreneur and a small business owner. Please see below the instructor blog:

Instructor Post:



At the end of our first class, I asked you to tell me if we can differentiate between an entrepreneur and a small business owner. Is it a personality issue or does it deal with how they perceive risk as we initially discussed. Is it about the number of businesses they operate and or maybe it is a purely a management style issue. Why do we describe one individual as a small business owner and another an entrepreneur? What about an individual that owns 3-4 small businesses, do we consider them an entrepreneur and why? This question will stir

a lot of debate, so for the purposes of this blog, tell me your opinion.

Please remember the following:

- reflect on your reading or classroom discussion(s);
- investigate topics online and then report on their research;
- talk about shared classroom experiences;
- copy and paste thought-provoking quotes from other blogs, and then offer their own thoughts on the topic; and
- ask your classmates to review your blogs, or provide feedback.

Sample Student Comment on Blog:

It appeared in class that most of us were startled at first by the question that Professor raised about the difference between an Entrepreneur and a Small Business Owner (SBO). I used to apply them interchangeably for the most part, and as some of us pointed out, many online sources also do the same.

The previous posts mentioned that the key differences between an entrepreneur and an SBO lie in how one perceives growth, innovation and risk. My stand is as follows:

Growth: Based on my research, attitude towards growth is the key differentiating characteristic. Growth opportunities are not just limited to small businesses. This is why it is not necessary that entrepreneurs have to be small business owners (one of the topics discussed in class). John Bello, in one of the examples given by Peter, is an entrepreneur. In a comment posted by the author of 'Thinking like an Entrepreneur', Peter I. Hupalo, exemplifies some of the differences between an entrepreneur and an SBO. <http://www.thinkinglike.com/Essays/Small-Business-vs-Entrepreneur.html>.

Innovation: As some of us pointed out, innovation defines entrepreneurship. I am not fully comfortable with this idea, although yes, they usually go hand in hand. Desire for growth, according to me, is the more fundamental trait. It is this desire that causes one to seek opportunities in the industry he is in – one of which is through innovation. A small restaurant owner, for instance, who uses traditional strategies to grow his business without making any innovations, can still be called an entrepreneur.

Risk: I also do not fully agree with the statement that high risk level is an inherent trait of an entrepreneur. Trying to gain market shares in a mature industry does involve several degrees of risk – financial, strategic or otherwise. But if the industry is new or there are not many players in it, one may achieve growth without necessarily taking high levels of risk. The level of competition determines a big portion of the risk that he needs to take. Emerging markets around the world have several examples of this case. Several industries are yet to reach the less urban areas of the emerging markets. Although entrepreneur in general may engage in risky endeavors, his goal should always be to minimize risks at a certain targeted growth level.

Debt was one of the topics mentioned in the blogs above. Yes, debt is a measure of financial risk. But low debt does not mean a 'no' to entrepreneurship. Again, depending on the state and type of the industry, the owner may not need to take high levels of financial risks. Besides, it may also mean that he has big personal funding.

In conclusion, desire for growth is the fundamental difference between an entrepreneur and a small business owner. A small business owner, as the name suggests, is simply an owner of a small business. The name does not necessarily say anything about his behavior. The two terms may or may not overlap depending on the behavior of the SBO. The other qualities of an entrepreneur - like high energy, high risk, and innovation- result due to one's desire for growth and therefore, should not be the defining characteristics of an entrepreneur.

Notes to the Instructor

What to expect and what to look for in student blogs

The blog instructions are specific, asking students to write about the difference of an entrepreneur and a small business owner, so their blogs will certainly address these two concepts. How they do so will vary. The student comment is very concrete, using examples relating to an entrepreneur and a small business owner.

This is a good blog example; don't expect students to cover everything in depth.

- Look for frequently-mentioned examples of entrepreneurs and small business owners.
- Record the number of students who concentrated on traits in these examples, those who focused on innovation, and those whose blogs centered on some on growth and lifestyles.
- Record the frequency with which students agree with those arguing there is no difference between them.

Integrating blog comments into class discussion and activities

Ask class members why certain individuals are mentioned as entrepreneurs more than small business owners. This can lead into a lively discussion of traits and how they are displayed by entrepreneurs familiar to many of us.

Have students form small groups with the task of linking the key traits of entrepreneurs. Groups post their results, leading into class discussion of how these two frameworks are similar and how they differ.

***** Extra Sample Blog *****

This blog deals with the topic of leadership. It is for an undergraduate class. The text book used with this classroom is *Leadership, Theory and Practice* by Peter Northouse.

Instructor's Blog #2

How do you define leadership?

Based on our class discussion, it seems that defining leadership is a difficult and complex task. Using the material covered in Chapter 1 of the text and incorporating our initial class discussion but based primarily on your personal opinions, please write a blog attempting to set some sort of personal definition to it. Questions and issues you should cover include:

- Are you a born leader?
- Can you learn leadership?
- What do you mean by a good or effective leader?
- Do you need to be charismatic to be a leader?
- In what situations can you become a leader? How?

A good hint on how to address these questions is to read Chapter One.

Sample Replies to Instructor's Blog

Sample #1:

Leadership is a difficult term to describe or define. It can be interpreted differently for all people, and many people consider various characteristics to be "leader-like." In my opinion I do not believe I was a born leader, although throughout the years I have developed many leadership qualities that have made me more of a leader. When I was younger I was more reserved and quiet. However as I was exposed to situations where I had to take initiative, I learned how important it is to work well with groups and help influence a positive work atmosphere where we can work together for a common goal.

Through my own experience, I learned leadership. For this reason, I do believe leadership is something that can be learned and gained through life experiences. I learned leadership when I was confronted with a difficult situation. During those times, I learned how to approach situations with my leadership skills. These leadership skills include understanding of others, team work, and influencing others to work toward a common goal. However, I do not believe it is something that can be taught through books, it is most likely taught through situations and circumstances, which is how I learned how to be an effective leader.

When I say effective leader, I mean a leader who is respectful of their followers, and always keeps the goal in mind. This leader influences it followers, and encourages everyone to work together as a team for their common goal.

I do not believe one needs to be charismatic to be a leader. In fact, I believe charisma may be problematic when leading a group. Followers may interpret a great deal of charisma to be controlling and too powerful. This would then take away from their feeling of accomplishment, because they feel pressured and controlled by the charismatic leader, instead of experiencing satisfaction of teamwork.

Leaders are most likely brought about in certain situations. This occurs when you are confronted with a situation where there is indecisiveness, and someone needs to take charge and lead the group. Most likely the leader will come about when they feel comfortable with the situation and believe they can influence the group positively in order to help them reach the goal. This level of comfort helps bring about a leader in a certain situation, and helps followers feel confident with the direction of the leader.

Sample #2:

As our Northouse book explains in the first chapter, "there are almost as many different definitions of *leadership* as there are people who have tried to define it" (Stogdill) As such, my definition will only add another definition to a word that has a wide variety of interpretations.

Our book defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse). This is one of the simplest definitions of the word, but leaves an extreme amount of room for interpretation. Using this definition as a basis, an individual can derive their own personal interpretation of what leadership embodies. This furthers their ability to influence others towards a common goal.

Some people believe that leadership is an inherited trait in which people are born with the qualities that make them natural leaders. However, some say that leadership is a set of skills that can be learned over time. In my opinion leadership is a combination of both personality traits and

a set of acquired skills. When these two are combined, a leader with great influence can be produced, resulting in a highly effective leader.

Charisma is also an important trait for any leader. Considering a leader is one who is able to influence followers, charismatic leaders are able to align followers, build teams and inspire and motivate them. In my opinion, this is a vital characteristic to being a leader.

Aside from assigned leadership, it is also possible to become a leader in a certain situation. Emergent leaders can develop for a various number of reasons through personal power, which can be a result of referent and expert power. Based on the followers' perception of a certain person, this person may be boosted to a position of assumed leadership.

What makes a good and effective leader is their ability to influence others. Without this ability, no group or organization would be able to function in a constructive manner. With this in mind, my definition of a leader is one who is able to influence followers for the any common goal.

Notes to the Instructor

What to expect and what to look for in student blogs

By far the majority of student blogs will center their discussion on leaders' personality or traits, either agreeing that traits are important or disagreeing with that proposition by emphasizing learning. With Northouse's simple definition in mind, most will also discuss the concept of influence as a key aspect of leadership. Some will show that the writer has read Chapter 1 by referring to behaviors, to leadership as a process, to the question of power and how it is obtained and used, or to the difference between leadership and management (or leaders and managers).

Try to get a rough measure of the proportion of blogs that focus mostly or entirely on traits and the proportion that focus on or include other aspects of leadership. The latter gives an idea of the proportion of class members who are showing some conceptual breadth in their blog responses.

Integrating blog comments into class discussion and activities

Ask individual class members to elaborate on certain comments in order to enrich further classroom discussion. You could also generate interest by asking students to state which of the elements of a definition of leadership is the most important. The writer of the first sample above clearly sees learned skills as paramount, while the writer of the second sample sees both traits and skills as important. Have each class member give his or her view and make a running list. Then ask the class to vote on which is the most important.